Twittering in the OECD's "Participative Web":

Microblogging and New Media Policy

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Abstract:

The recent popularity of microblogging site Twitter raises regulatory concerns that outstrip the purview of emerging new media policy, such as the recommendations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The OECD's 2007 report, *Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking*, frames user-generated content as key to the development of public discourse. Yet the report tends to ultimately conceive of user creations in terms of their contributions to the production of market-based value. Sites like Twitter both challenge and uphold such a reading, which becomes apparent upon examining the ways that policy adheres to certain popular myths around the Internet and digital technology. These myths—including this paper's main concern, the myth of the "End of Geography"—work in the service of policy recommendations that reflect neoliberal, capitalist value systems. As such, new developments in new media regulation need to integrate critical perspectives on techno-myths in order to take a more nuanced approach to the structural inequalities that pervade online culture.

Keywords: New Media Policy; Twitter; Social Networking; Microblogging; User-Generated Content; Celebrity; Citizen Journalism

Résumé:

La récente popularité du site de microblogues, Twitter, soulève des inquiétudes sur la réglementation qui surpassent la compétence des politiques des nouveaux médias, telles que les recommandations posées par l'Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économique (OCDE). Publié en 2007, le rapport de l'OCDE intitulé *Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking*, encadre le contenu créé par l'utilisateur comme étant la clé au développement du discours public. Cependant, le rapport tend ultimement à concevoir les créations des usagés en terme de leurs contributions à la production des valeurs basées sur le marché. Des sites comme Twitter font défi et défendent ces interprétations, ce qui devient évident lorsqu'on examine la façon dont les politiques adhèrent à certains mythes populaires entourant Internet et la technologie numérique. Ces mythes—incluant l'objet principal de cet article, le mythe de la fin de la géographie—travaille au service des recommandations de politiques qui reflètent les systèmes de valeurs néolibéraux et capitalistes. De ce fait, de nouveaux développements dans le domaine de la réglementation des nouveaux médias ont besoin d'intégrer des perspectives critiques à propos des mythes technologiques afin de prendre une approche plus nuancée aux inégalités structurales qui imprègnent la culture en ligne.

Mots-clés: Politiques de Nouveaux Médias; Twitter; Réseautage Social; Microblogue; Contenu Créé par l'Utilisateur; Célébrité; Journalisme Citoyens

Introduction

While blog-hosting sites like Blogger and LiveJournal have been popular since the late 1990s, they have recently become included in the designation of "Web 2.0"—the much-lauded participatory Internet spaces consisting mainly of user-generated content (UGC) within social networks (O'Reilly, 2005). To designate content as "user"-generated indicates a differentiation between non-professional users of Internet technology and professional writers and Webmasters working for institutional or corporate sources of content.[1] Because users are not professionalized and thus do not typically have access to the server space and technological infrastructure of institutional or corporate Web domains, much UGC appears through the infrastructural platforms of hosting sites that allow casual users to "self-publish" with little to no monetary investment.

The hosting site Twitter has recently become a popular incarnation of blogging activity; Twitter use is known as "microblogging" (Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007), a kind of hybrid between blogging and social networking, where users post "tweets" of 140 characters or less that respond to the site's orienting question of "what are you doing?" (About Twitter, n.d.). This simplicity is key to Twitter's popularity, in addition to the way that the site "accept[s] messages from SMS, Web, mobile Web, instant message, or from third party API projects, . . . mak[ing] it easy for folks to stay connected" (Why do so many people seem to like Twitter?, n.d.). Its

integration with mobile technology (Krishnamurthy, Gill & Arlitt, 2008), coupled with its streamlined format and interface, has earned the site a substantial six million unique visits per month (Kazeniac, 2009). Users can open an account by providing a full name, screen name and valid email address, allowing them access to this public means of expression and community dialogue. Despite Twitter's remediation of a kind of public communication, few regulatory policies exist that circumscribe its (or other hosting sites') mediations of public discourse. Individual posts (tweets), folksonomic tagging (trending topics) and communities (following) are given relatively free reign on Twitter, which encourages users to "contribute their creations to the public domain or consider progressive licensing terms" (Terms of Service, n.d.). When contrasted against draconian sites like Facebook,[2] Twitter's terms of service appear refreshingly open—especially in regard to the site's rejection of typical corporate-style intellectual property rights structures in favour of a commons-based approach to copyright.[3]

Yet Twitter is somewhat anomalous in its approach to intellectual property, and it may not stay as progressive in the coming years. As of mid-2009, the site operates at a loss: "While our business model is in a research phase, we spend more money than we make." Although, the site adds, "We plan to build Twitter, Inc into a successful, revenue-generating company that attracts world-class talent with an inspiring culture and attitude towards doing business" (How do you make money from Twitter?, n.d.; What's next for Twitter?, n.d.). Despite these claims of maintaining "an inspiring culture and attitude", generating revenue through social networking sites typically involves the integration of premium (paid) services, advertising and/or data-mining. Moreover, sites like Facebook presumably add the selling of user content to these profit-making strategies—hence its policies that claim ownership over all content posted to the site.

In light of such potentially exploitative aspects of UGC hosting sites, current debates around Internet policy need to address the ethical issue of regulating corporate jurisdiction over public discourse. Government regulation can be viewed as an ethical code for public dealings within that jurisdiction. Although as Silverstone (2004) points out, neoliberal ideologies tend to complicate what he sees as the best-case scenario of policy as an applied ethics, a set of "morally informed but rarely interrogated prescriptions for, or proscriptions of, practice" (2004: 441). In Canada, the recent federal ruling against Facebook's violation of privacy law marks an important step in this direction for Internet regulation, and yet it stands as a somewhat isolated example of policy enforcement (Bardeesy, 2009). It also shows how regulatory emphasis on privacy may come at the expense of attending to the insidious ways that Web 2.0 sites *profit* from user content. As Benkler (2006) argues, the current Internet regulation schemes that establish "proprietary models of information production at the expense of burdening nonmarket, nonproprietary production" need to be reconstituted to protect user creation (2006: 380).

One example of this kind of proposal comes, perhaps surprisingly, from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, an international economic research organization that prepares statistics and reports for its 30 mostly developed-world member countries.[4] The 2007 OECD report on the *Participative Web and User-Created Content: Web 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking* was developed to address regulatory concerns raised through a number of public and industry debates, including the OECD-Canada forum in Ottawa on October 3, 2007. The report calls for national governments to include stipulations that explicitly deal with UGC in their Internet policies—stipulations that are missing from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's (CRTC) *Perspectives on Canadian Broadcasting in New Media* (2008). One of the OECD's main goals is to support global business, but it also maintains the importance of public discourse in bolstering democratic values through the "openness and the

decentralised nature of the Internet" (OECD, 2007: 93). Yet despite this appeal to the public value of UGC, the language of the OECD report belies its fidelity to certain Internet-related myths that uphold the dominance of transnational corporations amid the developments of Web 2.0. Primary myths here include: the centrality of technological innovation, the Internet as "global village", democracy and equality through diversity of expression, and participation as liberation. This paper will address these myths in light of the OECD's stance on UGC, using Twitter as an illustration of how UGC fares in the relatively unregulated province of Web 2.0 today.

Methodologically, a focus on the language of the OECD report and on the discursive significance of Internet myths is not meant to divert attention from the substantive effects and practices of new media policymaking. Following the work of Chakravartty and Sarikakis (2006), this paper aims to "be attuned to the role of language and presentation on legitimizing policy normative frameworks" (2006: 139). The kind of language used in the OECD report not only permeates government documents, but it also offers discursive structures that inform public conceptions of Internet policy. The method involved selecting specific quotations from the report, determined by the extent to which its language pointedly illustrates the "digital myths" (Mosco, 2004) under discussion. As such, this study models itself after Livingstone and Lunt's (2007) study of the semantic conflations of "citizen" and "consumer" in the rhetoric of the United Kingdom's regulatory body Ofcom, the implications of which also resonate with the OECD Report's discursive strategy. The notorious rhetoric of consumption figures center stage across diverse articulations of Internet policy, reflecting the centrality of market logic in the ethical and regulatory attitudes toward Web 2.0, especially around notions of users' rights and intellectual property.

Technological Innovation

From its introductory paragraphs, the OECD Report (2007) exhibits an underlying faith in the social, cultural and most of all, economic benefits of user-generated content. For instance, in its list of the concerns central to the regulation of UGC, the report privileges the foremost goal of "Enhancing R&D, innovation and technology" (2007: 72). Despite their status as amateur production, user contributions have been central to new developments in digital technology, for example through the open source software movement. For the OECD, however, user competencies are best translated into "business" rather than free culture. The report claims that "new forms of digital content innovations are often based less on traditional scale advantages and large initial capital investments and more on decentralised creativity, organisational innovation and new business models for content production and diffusion" (Ibid: 74). By emphasizing innovation here, the OECD report constructs a vision of the new paradigm for R&D in business and policy.

This statement also provokes a discussion of digital myths, following Mosco's (2004) definition of the typical structure of these mythic accounts. Mosco describes how typical technological myths tell of a revolution brought about by the "End of" something—in his account, History, Geography and Politics. Such a revolution opens the opportunity space for a host of liberatory consequences, which in the myths, flow directly from the adoption of computer technology (Mosco, 2004: 86). In the OECD's version of these myths, UGC heralds a revolution in participatory technological innovation, which will alter the corporate fabric of transnational business.

The centrality of technological innovation to this discourse papers over what Mosco (2004) identifies as the work of marketing to draw out the appeal of computer technology. As Mosco claims, public fascination with the intricacies of computer technology is not inherent, but rather it requires the political economy of marketing to promote technology using the discourse of liberation. This discourse gets produced and circulated not only by corporations, but also by governments. Mosco outlines the government's role in constituting this myth amid a neoliberal climate that compromises its legitimacy:

> One of the few areas left for . . . [government] to establish a genuine, universally recognized allure is with the new technology. As a result, governments scramble to spend money attracting high technology companies, putting computers in schools, expanding business and household access, whatever it takes to strengthen identification with the new technologies.
>
> (2004: 43)

The way that technological determinism pervades the rhetoric of both corporations and government bodies is not a coincidence. Mythic portrayals of technology serve as vehicles for neoliberal governments' strategic maintenance of the existing structure of proprietary corporate control, as opposed to promoting any "revolutionary" innovation.

In contemporary multistakeholder policymaking, ownership claims of transnational corporations tend to remain dominant (Chakravartty & Sarikakis, 2006: 10, 38).[5] To uphold this dominant position, companies and governments use marketing to portray improvements in technology as socially beneficial, and thus ethically sound, in a "network economy". In the OECD report's (2007) summary, for example, "more active users, consumers and user-centered innovation were seen to have increasing economic impacts and social importance" (2007: 15). While the inclusion of UGC's social significance is exclusionary on many counts (most obviously to those without access to the technology), it also serves to equate innovation with technological advancements, discounting other sources of creativity. Innovation thus works as a "buzzword" for economically-minded corporations and governments (Menou, 2004).

Ultimately, while heralding UGC as a socially and culturally liberatory phenomenon, user creations are harnessed into market logic under the rhetoric of technological innovation. OECD policy recommendations thus discount the creative impulses of the "users" behind a site like Twitter, focusing instead on their activities as consumers. The OECD report (2007) recommends that

> member countries should implement regulatory frameworks that balance the interests of *suppliers* and *users*, in areas such as the protection of intellectual property rights, and digital rights management, without disadvantaging innovative e-business models.
>
> (2007: 78; *emphasis added*)

The report's construction of a dichotomy between suppliers and users depicts users as essentially consumers; as such, regulatory focus turns away from protecting UGC, and toward corporate intellectual property rights and digital rights management as central concerns for facilitating "innovative e-business models". The OECD's recommendations to governments have more to do with bolstering online commerce than with encouraging user creativity. This can be seen as a

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"strong network effects", where "a small number of platforms draw large amounts of traffic . . . becoming to be the most popular Websites worldwide" (OECD, 2007: 9). With a small number of Web 2.0 sites attracting disproportionately large numbers of users, UGC plays a central role in the fabled global village.

While the OECD report (2007) does consider the "digital divide" as the main threat to achieving worldwide communication through UGC (2007: 68), it overwhelmingly maintains a global-village goal for Internet technology. Mosco (2004) terms this the "End of Geography" myth, which begins from the premise that the Internet is spatially independent, that "computer communication makes space infinitely malleable, the logical extension of a process of freeing people from spatial constraint with all its confining economic and social implications" (2004: 92). According to Mosco, this myth obscures the way that place can be "painfully persistent", such as in geolocation software and place-bound legal systems. To this I would add online surveillance mechanisms that tie population demographics to precise locations. And less ominously, place also seems crucial for Internet communication that organizes local citizen movements (e.g. Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1997; Ford & Gil, 2001).

Douglas (2006) has argued in a similar vein that, counter to the end of geography posited by the global village concept, what the Internet has actually prompted is a "turn within": "technologies that enable us to look out beyond our borders can also encourage us to gaze at our navels, and it has turned out that the latter use is more profitable and cost effective than the former" (2006: 620). Despite technological potential to connect worldwide, she argues, American media has tended toward an ethnocentric and narcissistic focus on itself. The turn within implicates a recent ethical debate around mainstream journalism that has tended to produce what audiences want, rather than what is ethically responsible, for the sake of the bottom line (Hamelink, 2000). Douglas herself cites U.S. journalism as a case example of the turn within, where celebrity stories and advertising dominate news media, revealing a "soft determinism" in how uses of technology are subject to overriding ideological parameters (2006: 625). Douglas's theory thus takes issue with statements like the OECD Report's (2007) assertion that UGC tools "constitute an outlet for citizens to express themselves, potentially creating greater social cohesion and identification" (2007: 99). Such a statement assumes a neutrality to UGC technology, where other social, political, economic and ideological influences remain separate from global communication.

The global village myth nevertheless serves as a powerful allure of Internet communication; Twitter in particular has been celebrated for its role in facilitating citizen journalism that, in association with traditional news media (Thurman, 2008), succeeded in disseminating key information about the recent political upheaval in Iran. Following the June 12, 2009 federal elections, which faced allegations of fraud by incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an estimated several hundred thousand supporters of opposition candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi staged demonstrations, mainly in Tehran. The government's response to these protests involved cruelty and violence—intended to be shielded from the rest of the world through a ban on foreign journalists and a severing of satellite signals and Internet connectivity. Some of the few images, accounts and videos that did make it outside of Iran's borders did so through citizen use of Twitter; the brevity of tweets helped them to be transmitted even without reliable Internet connections (Iran protesters using tech to skirt curbs, 2009). Moreover, the association of Twitter with mobile technology furthered its utility in an uncertain day to day living situation for many Iranians.

The fact that the site was able to get messages about the events in Iran across to Western viewers was heralded in the press as a victory for Twitter itself (Grossman, 2009; Khan, 2009); as CBS News Science and Technology Correspondent Daniel Sieberg mused, "the revolution will be blogged" (cited in Iran protesters using tech to skirt curbs, 2009). While Twitter was instrumental in raising global awareness of the situation in Iran, only a few days after the start of the protest, the trending topic "#iranelection" was superseded in popularity by a massive number of tweets concerning a pivotal episode of U.S. cable reality program, *Jon and Kate Plus Eight*— in which an opportunistic couple with eight children lament the tabloid scrutiny they have faced since the onset of their marital troubles. Following this, nearly a month after the Iranian election, discussion around the death of pop icon Michael Jackson superseded both "#iranelection" and "#jon&kate", dominating the Twitter trending topics by an enormous margin (Twitter trending stats, 2009). As Sweetser and Kaid (2008) argue, such a celebrity focus may be partly responsible for political cynicism among citizens/users. It also reveals how the absence of professional codes of ethics in citizen journalism does not mean that content produced is necessarily exempt from the "turn within" effect. The fact that Twitter discussion around American entertainment media has surpassed that of a major political uprising thus lends credence to Douglas's (2006) contention that the global village myth conceals an increasing cultural narcissism manifest in Twitter's collusion with the U.S. celebrity landscape.

Celebrity has indeed been a central focus of Twitter since the site gained significant popularity during the 2007 South by Southwest music and culture festival in Austin, Texas (Terdiman, 2007). Since that time, some of the most notorious uses of Twitter have involved celebrity tweets, such as actor Ashton Kutcher's challenge to the cable news channel CNN over who could more quickly gain one million followers (Kutcher won—as of October 2009, he has more followers than anyone else on the site). What is significant about this particular example is that Kutcher had not appeared in any major film roles during this period; his Twitter activities seemed to function primarily as a way to maintain his celebrity status despite his current relative obscurity. In this way, Twitter offers a platform for celebrities to conduct personal public relations campaigns, which appear to succeed in garnering media attention over the less-valued Twittering of non-famous users.

So what does this mean for emerging Internet policy, like the OECD recommendations, that tend to collapse differences between users through "global village" rhetoric? In some ways, celebrity users of Twitter function as corporations rather than as citizens, as illustrated through the labour that entertainment personas like Kutcher perform as part of their careers of staying publicly relevant. Moreover, the celebrities with the most Twitter followers tend to be associated with the U.S. entertainment industry in particular, which combined with the site's origins and operation in the U.S. (San Francisco), serves to highlight the way that Internet properties are still situated in a specific place, and still mitigated by geopolitical boundaries. While Twitter claims that all users' tweets are legally located in the U.S.,[7] international user content is in fact subject to both domestic and U.S. jurisdiction, potentially creating confusion in regard to the "location" of Internet content. In a more general sense, the popularly mythologized ambiguity around place and location online obscures not only the legally binding delineations of geography, but the Internet's colonization of the private sphere. UGC often originates in the context of the home; this context is in fact subject to public legislation, resonating with one of the most-publicized detriments of a global village: a loss of privacy.

Difference, Diversity and Participation

Along with the global village myth comes the notion that UGC furnishes a platform for free expression, thereby increasing the diversity of viewpoints that become publicly available. This increased diversity is linked in turn to a more democratic social fabric, which takes into account the concerns of all citizens. As we have seen with Twitter, increased diversity is not always automatically tied into democratic process, unless choosing to follow a certain celebrity over another would be considered democratic. Similarly, the OECD report's (2007) wording of the "diversity" proposition proves somewhat less preoccupied with the social aspects of the Internet's democratization: "The Internet can be seen as an open platform enriching the diversity of opinions (including product reviews), various political and societal debates, the free flow of information and freedom of expression" (2007: 90). By including the expression of product reviews among UGC's free forms of expression, the report engages in a typical "consumer-citizen" rhetorical conflation of product choice with democratic ideals (Livingstone & Lunt, 2007: 52). Increased diversity supposedly results from increased competition in the Internet's "marketplace of ideas", although market forces have in fact been proven to ultimately decrease the diversity of goods and services available (Freedman, 2005: 17). UGC's diversity of expression myth nonetheless becomes framed as an aspect of informed consumerism, rather than as a true embrace of alternative viewpoints.

Moreover, the OECD report (2007) asserts that UGC guarantees an increased cultural diversity over time: "According to the long tail effect, a more diverse and substantially increased set of cultural content will find niche audiences and users, potentially expanding creativity" (2007: 64). As mentioned above, this creativity is conceptualized as "innovation" with market benefits, specifically in regard to the performance of niche "audiences and users", who suspiciously resemble consumers within niche markets. Recalling Douglas's (2006) turn within, market segmentation proves (ironically) to underlie the presumption of the Internet as global village. Terranova (2004) concurs that digitization has facilitated the dividing up of market preferences in a way analogous to the fragmentation of information in the Internet's packet-switching network (2004: 34). Yet it is important to temper a technologically deterministic view of the Internet's role in market segmentation by acknowledging the ways that neoliberal interests have shaped social perceptions of the technology's uses.

In the quotation above, the OECD report describes increased diversity and its segmentation of audiences and users into niche markets as a result of the "long tail effect", a piece of marketing logic that predicts the economy's shift away from goods with mass popularity, towards a larger number of niche products (Anderson, 2006). While the long tail concept has typically been applied to economic models—such as the revenue-generating schemes of online companies like Amazon.com—user segmentation is said to reverberate down to local levels, which the OECD asserts will promote various public and social benefits. "The availability and diversity of (local) content in diverse languages is increasing", the report claims: "as more participate in building and cultivating culture and the democracy associated with egalitarian cultural development, greater general identification of users with culture and society may develop and less alienation result" (OECD, 2007: 65). When examining Twitter as a case study, however, it becomes apparent that this utopian vision of local UGC does not necessarily come to fruition. As illustrated by the example of the Iranian election aftermath, momentary local (and international) mobilization tends to be subsumed under the homogenizing force of U.S. entertainment culture.

Attention to celebrity over local politics on UGC sites highlights how the term "diversity", as employed in Internet policy documents like the OECD report, works to negate a real, situated, embodied notion of diversity in favor of a market-based notion of consumer choice. For example, myths of the Internet's attendant bodily transcendence tend to obscure the ways that embodied difference—along axes such as gender, race, class, age, etc.—underpin even the most superficial conception of diversity. Because mediated interaction happens virtually rather than face-to-face, so the saying goes, "on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993). This myth can be seen as a subset of what Mosco (2004) identifies as the End of Geography, in that the physical situatedness of the self, including place and body, becomes irrelevant due to the technology's compression of space-time (92). Yet compression is not the most accurate way to describe the action of digital information networks. Terranova (2004) claims that rather, the key processes at work here are "microdissection and modulation", where the Internet does not result in disembodiment, but a micro-fragmentation of the body:

> as it is split and decomposed into segments of variable and adjustable sizes (race, gender, sexual preferences; but also income, demographics, cultural preferences and interests)[, i]t is not only the messages that are fragmented and constantly renewed and recombined, but also the receivers of those messages, in the form of bits of information archived and cross-referenced through a million databases.
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> (2004: 34)

Terranova invokes philosopher Gilles Deleuze's notion of "dividuals", or subindivdiual units, as an illustrative term to describe the micro-level fragmentation engendered by the niche marketing and targeted ads made possible by extensive data-mining.

In addition to the way that "dataveillance" violates privacy rights (e.g. Chung & Grimes, 2005), data-mining becomes a concern for its gendered, aged, raced and classed application to target marketing, often setting up and reinforcing heteronormative media images through its construction of certain "typical" niche audiences using aggregate demographic statistics. Twitter users provide this kind of demographic information about themselves, both intentionally and as a side-effect of using the site:

> our servers automatically record information that your browser sends whenever you visit a Website ("Log Data"). This Log Data may include information such as your IP address, browser type or the domain from which you are visiting, the Web-pages you visit, the search terms you use, and any advertisements on which you click.
>
> (Twitter privacy policy, n.d.)

The data collected is used to identify specific markets that can be appealed to using "personalized" information. Targeting specifically gendered/raced/aged/classed products toward segmented markets tends to reify identity stereotypes in promotional imagery and discourse (e.g. Herring, 2003). This ubiquitous logic of segmented niche markets undergirds the subsequent, popular addition to the infamous "dog" saying: "but they know you buy dog food."

The positive flip-side of data-mining is that sites like Twitter are said to promote greater civic and social participation. For instance, under the section heading "Social Impacts" of UGC, the OECD report (2007) lists "Increased user autonomy, participation and communication" as

key outcomes. Accordingly, Internet movements toward more autonomy and participation "imply a shift away from simple passive consumption of broadcasting and other mass distribution media models (couch potatoes) to more active choosing, interacting and creating content . . . and a shift to a participatory 'culture'" (OECD, 2007: 64). This statement portrays participative users as the polar opposites of passive (and slovenly) couch potatoes; participation becomes synonymous with action. The model active participant in new forms of media consumption has been discussed vigorously within Media Studies scholarship (e.g. Bucy & Gregson, 2001). In fact, Jenkins's (1992) work on "textual poachers" is notorious in this regard. His more recent book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), outlines several domains where users actively participate in media creation, constituting their own meanings and cultures rather than passively absorbing mass-produced entertainment. The OECD report echoes some of Jenkins's assertions in its own claim that increased user participation has "led to the democratization of media production" (2006: 64).

Yet, in addition to the barriers to true "democratization" erected by unequal access and skill levels, increased participation in digital media production does not necessarily translate into political activity (e.g. Barney, 2008); consider the way that Twitter tends to level-out political events like the Iranian protests with media events like the Jon and Kate "scandal". Moreover, the OECD report itself subsumes participation under market imperatives: "More active users, consumers and user-centered innovation . . . are spurring new business models and are beginning to bypass, intersect with, and create new opportunities for, traditional media and content-related industries and access routes" (OECD, 2007: 15). By mobilizing the positive connotations of participation as part of an expressly economic initiative, the OECD report highlights one of the dangers of the participation myth: its association with liberation. Chakravartty and Sarikakis (2006) argue that one of the biggest problems with the celebration of participation and transcendence afforded by new technologies is its "adverse consequences for the laborers of the new Information Society whose labor hours—once regulated and largely defined—spill over into the private sphere and invade leisure time" (2006: 113). Regardless of whether it brings pleasure to users, the labor of UGC plays a role in maintaining the productive lives of mainly corporately-owned hosting websites, such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace, which would obviously cease to exist without user labor. By framing this labor as "participation" and participation as "liberatory" a misleading optimism obscures the insidious ways in which the private sphere gets colonized through Internet technologies. The OECD's emphasis on the centrality of the "participative Web" in its title engages a utopian ideal that obscures the rather thornier ethical issue of free online labor.

Conclusion

Stemming from Mosco's (2004) description of digital myths heralding the revolutionary impact of Internet technology, this paper has argued that these myths underpin the rhetoric of policy recommendations from the OECD (2007) and the practices of microblogging site Twitter. Central myths examined—involving technological innovation, the "global village", difference and diversity of expression and liberatory participation—show that despite pronouncements of beneficial social impacts, an overarching market logic often compromises the progressive potentials of UGC. While ethical policymaking might help retain some of UGC's promise, for Chakravartty and Sarikakis (2006), legitimate policy practice typically crystallizes mythic accounts of the Internet in favor of neoliberal deregulatory agendas. Such agendas produce

policy recommendations organized around binary understandings of technology that promote a hierarchical distribution of users. By positing technological infrastructures as the source of social change, policy-makers perpetuate mandates that are "technologically deterministic with the assumption that the market and technology are inherently neutral forces" (Chakravartty & Sarikakis, 2006: 14). The myth of determinism, along with Darwinist models of market competition, further supports attendant myths about the social consequences of the increasing ubiquity of Internet technology. In this regard, UGC appears to have arisen out of the competition model, as a response to consumer demand. Yet its location squarely within a market model should raise some criticism of its celebrated status, especially since hosting sites like Twitter are not quite as benevolent as they may seem.

Ultimately, of course, Twitter functions as a business (although it is an as-yet unprofitable business), while simultaneously portraying itself as committed to its users. As the site's "About" page asserts,

> Twitter has many appealing opportunities for generating revenue but we are holding off on implementation for now because we don't want to distract ourselves from the more important work at hand which is to create a compelling service and great user experience for millions of people around the world.

The site's benevolent posturing works to conceal the key function of the "for now" which indicates that Twitter will eventually seek to profit from its user content upon growing further in popularity. As such, policy recommendations from the OECD need to find opposition in recommendations that will protect UGC, with the crucial input of civil society groups concerned with Internet user rights (e.g. Clement, Moll & Shade, 2001; Mueller, Pagé & Kuerbis, 2004; Guttman, 2007).

The examination of new media myths subtending Internet policy discourse should be used to suggest ways that policy might redress some of the negative consequences of popular mythic misconceptions. In the OECD report (2007), for example, intellectual property rights dominate the discussion of what is at stake for federal regulators. The focus on intellectual property, however, obscures some of the more pervasive implications of information networks, particularly in terms of their relation to culture (Terranova, 2004: 7). For Chakravartty and Sarikakis (2006), this imperative translates into a necessary inquiry into the neutrality with which technology is generally imparted (2006: 163). In order to open up policy discourse beyond utopian ideas of technological change, regulators should focus on the structural underpinnings of Internet inequalities. For example, the authors suggest that examining the structural poverty responsible for the digital divide would be more productive than simply addressing access or "use".

The regulatory convergence necessary for rendering such a comprehensive picture of global structural inequalities may not yet be upon us, but there is certainly room within the technologically focused recommendations to encourage a code of media ethics for users (Hamelink, 2000). This code would ideally be able to transcend the limitations of regulation in fostering a public media culture where social platforms like Twitter might be mobilized in their most revolutionary ways. As Silverstone (2004) reminds us, regulation is itself fraught with the ethical complexities of a neoliberal agenda, and thus does not necessarily guarantee the right to communicate. He argues that while the uncertain ethical terrain of multistakeholder policymaking may (at best) be able to regulate media production, "A responsible and

accountable media culture is another matter entirely, for it depends on a critical and literate citizenry, and a citizenry, above all, which is critical with respect to, and literate in the ways of, mass mediation and media representation" (2004: 440). In the interest of achieving this kind of holistic social accountability, regulators need vital public consultation that may in fact retain some of the optimism of Internet myths in working toward an ethical framework for encouraging media-literate citizens.

Notes

1   Or see Benkler's (2006) definition of "The User": "we are seeing the emergence of the user as a new category of relationship to information production and exchange. Users are individuals who are sometimes consumers and sometimes producers. They are substantially more engaged participants, both in defining the terms of their productive activity and in defining what they consume and how they consume it" (2006: 138-139). This definition posits greater autonomy for users as opposed to consumers, yet as this paper will argue, such autonomy is the function of myth more often than it is a reality.

2   According to Facebook's Terms of Use, the site holds legal ownership and all licensing rights of any content posted by users, indefinitely.

3   From Twitter's Terms of Service, under the heading "Copyright (What's Yours is Yours)": "We claim no intellectual property rights over the material you provide to the Twitter service. Your profile and materials uploaded remain yours. You can remove your profile at any time by deleting your account. This will also remove any text and images you have stored in the system".

4   For further information, see the OECD website: www.oecd.org.

5   The authors describe the contemporary terrain of global governance, focusing particularly on the role of transnational corporate actors.

6   McChesney explains: "Deregulation in media policy means, in reality, *re-regulation* purely to serve powerful corporate interests with no concern for the general public whatsoever" (2007: 142).

7   As outlined in Twitter's privacy policy (n.d.): "If you reside outside the U.S. your personally identifiable information will be transferred to the U.S., and processed and stored there under U.S. privacy standards. By visiting our Site and providing information to us, you consent to such transfer to, and processing in, the U.S.".

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